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SUBJECT: TOMSK ELECTIONS: ALL PARTIES IN PLAY, ELECTION OUTCOME NOT IN DOUBT

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) With a well-educated population fed by six universities and at a safe distance from Moscow, the Siberian region of Tomsk seems tailor-made for liberal-leaning parties like Yabloko or SPS. Disarray within those parties, a popular governor allied with the Kremlin-backed party United Russia, and voter apathy seem likely to ensure that neither SPS nor Yabloko crosses the seven-percent threshold to representation in the regional legislature March 11, however.

Among the positive moments in the current campaign: all eight parties that applied to participate in the election were registered, as were the lion's share of the individual-mandate candidates. The notable exception on the individual candidate list is defrocked Mayor Aleksandr Makarov whom, observers in Tomsk agree, was corrupt, but also too ambitious and outspoken for some in the region's political establishment. End summary.

Parties in Play

¶2. (U) As in thirteen other regions in Russia, the Tomsk region is scheduled to hold elections on Sunday, March 11. At stake are all forty-two seats in the regional legislature.

Twenty-one of the regional deputies will be chosen from party lists. The remaining twenty-one seats are being contested by individual candidates. Unlike in other regions of Russia, all eight parties that applied to be registered were accepted by the Regional Election Commission. The participating parties are:

-- United Russia (YR)
-- the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR)
-- the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF)
-- Patriots of Russia (PR)
-- Yabloko
-- the Conceptual Party "Unity" (CPU)
-- the Union of Right Forces (SPS)
-- For a Just Russia (SR)

¶3. (U) YR, LDPR, and KPRF were automatically registered for the elections, as they are represented in the State Duma. PR, Yabloko, and the CPU gathered enough valid signatures to be registered, while SR and SPS were registered by paying the required deposit, nine million rubles.

Single-Mandate Races

¶ 14. (U) One hundred and three candidates attempted to participate in the twenty-one single-mandate races. In order to be registered, candidates were required to either collect 400 valid signatures, or pay a deposit of 900 thousand rubles. The Regional Election Commission (REC) refused nine applications. One of the nine was registered after appealing to court. The candidacy of the most controversial potential contender, former Mayor Aleksandr Makarov, was rejected by a district election commission. (Makarov is currently under investigation and in jail. See paragraph 10, below.) The commission's decision was overturned by a Tomsk court, but Makarov was later excluded on the grounds that he had concealed information about his finances. The other seven candidates were denied registration on the grounds that they had failed to collect enough valid signatures. They did not appeal the REC's decision.

"Locomotives" Head Party Lists

¶ 15. (SBU) A number of the parties have attempted to win votes by having well-known politicians head their lists. The ever-popular Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is leading LDPR Tomsk into the elections, and SPS National Chairman Nikita Belykh is at the top of his party's regional list. The Kremlin-sponsored YR has not included National Chairman Boris Gryzlov on its Tomsk list, but it has given the number one spot to Tomsk Region Governor Viktor Kress, who is believed to be as popular in the region as President Putin is nationwide. Zhirinovskiy, Belykh, and Kress have no intention of becoming regional deputies if their parties cross the seven-percent threshold. Each would step aside in favor of the number two candidate on his party's list. A recently-passed Tomsk

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Region law limits to one the number of prominent candidates on any list who have no intention of serving if elected, which has somewhat reduced the role of what in Russia are called "locomotives," or big-name candidates, in the region's campaign this time around.

¶ 16. (SBU) Although the big names may have no intention of serving in Tomsk if elected they have been traveling regularly to the region in support of their respective parties. Boris Gryzlov visited Tomsk on February 18, where he promised that the Tomsk Polytechnical University, one of the city's six universities, would become the third in Tomsk to be win a state contest for innovative programs, which brings with it a large amount of money. LDPR Chairman Vladimir Zhirinovskiy followed Gryzlov into town on February ¶ 17. About six thousand spectators massed for his meeting at the town's largest structure. The SPS's Nikita Belykh also visited Tomsk in mid-February, as did KPRF Chairman Gennadiy Zyuganov. The conduct of a visit by SR Chairman Sergey Mironov, observers say, was marred by the regional authorities' attempts to prevent him from meeting with voters.

Smear Campaign, Deceptive Advertising

¶ 17. (SBU) Dirty tricks have allegedly marred the Tomsk campaign. SPS has reported inter alia both to Governor Kress and to the Regional Election Commission (REC) that anonymous campaign material alleging that the party is in alliance with disgraced Tomsk Mayor Aleksandr Makarov has been distributed. Tomsk residents, according to SPS, have also found in their mailboxes leaflets reporting that the party had hired HIV-positive campaign workers and that SPS Chairman Belykh is one of Russia's hated oligarchs. Efforts by local law enforcement, in tandem with the REC, had led to the confiscation of campaign materials. The Deputy Chairman of

the REC Eldar Yusybov told Embassy that, as of March 2, thirty-two complaints had been filed with the Commission. Most of those, he said, concerned campaign literature, and were filed overwhelmingly by political parties.

¶8. (SBU) YR, SPS, and the KPRF complained to the REC that some of the Kremlin-cozy YR's advertising was deceptive. One billboard, prominently displayed around town, suggested that, in casting their votes for YR, Tomskites were voting to re-elect the Governor. After protests by other parties, the REC required that the offending advertisement be removed (although at least one was still visible during Poloff's March 1 - 2 visit). The remaining YR advertisements that passed muster with the REC urged voters to "check the box for (Governor) Kress, and made scant allusion to YR. YR's attempts to parlay Kress's popularity into votes seemed to have been supported by President Putin, who on March 5 nominated the Governor for an additional term. (Kress has been Governor since 1991.) The newly-elected regional legislature will vote on Kress's candidacy, and YR is presumably urging voters to ensure that their party is in the majority if they wish to see Kress remain. Two other parties --SPS and LDPR-- were quick to attach themselves to Kress's coattails. Both announced that they would vote for the Governor, if elected. The KPRF and SR told voters they would decide after the March 11 elections. (Local observers trace Kress' popularity to his perceived success in winning "special economic zone" status for the region, fostering the growth of institutes of higher education, and having Tomsk named the site for the July 2006 Russian - German Summit.)

¶9. (SBU) Campaign billboards for all of the major political parties lined the streets. LDPR's featured Zhirinovskiy, while SR's seemed to have been inspired by the post-Revolution poster art of Vladimir Mayakovskiy, with workers punching top-hatted capitalists in the nose. Other SR posters advertised the party as the "new course of the President." Scattered conversations during the March 1 - 2 visit suggested that Tomskites were coming home each evening to mailboxes filled with campaign literature.

Mayor Makarov

¶10. (SBU) Tomsk's Mayor is currently in jail awaiting trial. His attempts to get on the ballot for the March 11 elections have apparently been thwarted. Makarov has been accused of corruption (the police allegedly found USD 2 million in his

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apartment at the time of their surprise search, and he is alleged to have diverted government land to private construction projects). Observers polled during Poloff's visit agree that the Mayor was corrupt but noted that "everyone in power is" and praised Makarov for his energy. An informal poll shown on Tomsk's TV-2 during Poloff's visit had ten thousand respondents supporting Makarov and an equal number opposed. His mistake, Tomsk observers believe, was to have vocally opposed federal plans to have mayors appointed and to have announced his intention to become speaker of the regional legislature. In setting his cap for the speaker job, Makarov stepped on the toes of one of Governor Kress's proteges, the current Speaker Maltsev.

The Media: Tentative

¶11. (SBU) Contacts suggested that the 2006 amendment to the law on extremism and amendments to the electoral law had made coverage of the election more complicated for the media. At a February 17 meeting of the Tomsk Regional Election Commission with the media, REC Deputy Chairman Eldar Yusybov agreed that the law was very complicated and noted that the mass media was protecting itself by limiting its coverage of the campaign. The Director of the Tomsk NGO Golos Yelena Sidorenko held that it was difficult for the media to tell

the difference between "information and agitation." Their preference, she said, was to pay minimal attention to the campaign. The Deputy Editor of the analytical weekly Tomsk News Aleksandr Krasnoperov reported, however, that the law notwithstanding, he was continuing to publish "edgy" materials about the campaign. He noted that the law provides for several warnings before legal action could be taken. His newspaper, to date, had encountered no problems, he said.

SPS: Demoralized

¶12. (SBU) The Leader of Tomsk's SPS (and Rector of the University of Radioelectronics) Anatoliy Kobzev told Poloff March 2 that he believed YR was the source of much of the anonymous "dirty tricks" his party had been subject to. (Kobzev is number two on an SPS party list headed by Party Chairman Nikita Belykh. Number three on the list is Radioelectronics Prorector Aleksandr Uvarov. SPS was fielding no single-mandate candidates.) Kobzev noted that SPS had run in tandem with Yabloko in the last city council elections. Together, the parties had garnered 8.57 percent of the vote. With the amended electoral law prohibiting electoral blocs, and the Moscow SPS, Yabloko leaderships unwilling to merge, Kobzev believed that neither Yabloko nor his party would cross the seven-percent threshold to representation in the regional legislature.

¶13. (SBU) Kobzev described no restrictions on media access "if you have money." His party had little funding and, other than the television and newspaper space allotted it by law, SPS campaign advertising was limited to the occasional billboard, leaflets, and a monthly newspaper "Right Bank." Kobzev said the SPS Chairman Nikita Belykh had drawn "a small crowd" during his recent visit to Tomsk. Kobzev reminisced fondly about the time when Yegor Gaydar and Anatoliy Chubais headed the party and it was "much more successful." He saw no way for SPS to counter the money and administrative resources at the disposal of YR.

Yabloko: Defiant

¶14. (SBU) If Kobzev was subdued, the contingent from Yabloko Poloff encountered March 2 was defiant. They reported that national party Chairman Grigoriy Yavlinsky would visit Tomsk March 5 in an attempt to revive a campaign they admitted was unlikely to succeed. In Yabloko's way, they said were YR's administrative resources, which gave it the ability to "confuse voters." (Kobzev reported that Yabloko Tomsk had virtually ceased to exist as a party following the death in 2000 of then-leader Aleksandr Pletnev. Pletnev had been the Speaker of the Tomsk Regional Council. With his disappearance, according to Kobzev, Yabloko had been taken over by a "criminal," Anatoliy Rybkov, who had undercut the party's image in Tomsk. In their meeting with Poloff, the delegation from Yabloko sounded equally negative about SPS, describing the party as wallowing in "populism."

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YR: Confident

¶15. (SBU) In a brief, March 1 meeting, YR Duma Deputy Aleksandr Zharkikh seemed uninformed and unconcerned about the upcoming elections. He was certain that YR would ride Governor Kress's coattails to a majority in the regional legislature. Zharkikh dismissed all competing parties, including SR, although he acknowledged that the latter had its "patrons in Moscow."

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